Rockford Area Lutheran Ministries

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In the introduction to his new book, *Life Among the Lutherans*, Garrison Keillor explains that he was:

> **brought up in a small fundamentalist sect, the Sanctified Brethren,**
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> **believed in separation from the world and looked on Lutherans as worldly, ignorant of the finer points of scripture, a jovial band of**
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> **large people who made too much of Christmas and took**

much too much pride in their damn choirs, more a social club like the Elks than a gathering of the devout.

Keillor says he actually doesn't know much about Lutherans, but they love him and keep inviting him to talk to them. "Lutherans are a humble and generous and forgiving people," he says.

"The place for any Christian, Lutherans know, is not up front speaking (or receiving an honorary degree, as he did at Gustavus Adolphus College) but in the back of the hall ushering, or else in the basement making coffee and heating up the cinnamon rolls. Virtue lies in humble

service. It's the jerks who stand up and give self congratulating speeches.

"Lutherans" Keillor concludes, are "ordinary people doing their best to be good – they gather together and give alms to the poor: they sing 'Lift Every Voice and Sing ′til Earth and Heaven Ring' so that tears come to your eyes, and they pray, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God – restore unto me the joy of thy salvation' . . . . and then they go home and put on their work clothes and tend their flower beds and groom their lawns."

I was fortunate to have married a Lutheran who is the incarnation of all that and much more and it was the very best thing I ever did.

She became a Presbyterian after I was ordained and it was embarrassing to hold out - but I have no illusions about where her heart is.

And last year, when you Lutherans decided to broaden your vision of who could be ordained to include gay/lesbian Lutherans in committed relationships (we have two people in our extended family - both really good Presbyterian young adults - who could not be ordained as Deacons or Elders if they wanted to be, which they don't) - so when the Lutherans managed to do, fairly quietly, it seemed to me, what we Presbyterians have not done and which threatens to undo us as we continue the battle which now is in something kike its

4th decade, my Lutheran wife's heart swelled with pride and, while it is not needling, she does let me know regularly that "her" church has done what "my" church has not. I have little doubt about where she will want to spend her Sunday mornings when the Presbyterians are no longer paying my salary.

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Elaine Pagels is a distinguished professor at Princeton University. She is not a seminary professor. She is a humanities scholar who studies and knows a lot about the human phenomenon of religion. Her specialty is early Christianity and Gnosticism, and she is widely respected for her scholarly research and books. She is not

particularly a church person. In fact, she had pretty much given up on the church.

But she begins one of her books, *Beyond Belief,* with an unusual anecdote and a very powerful witness.

On a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York, she interrupted her daily run by stopping in the vestibule of an Episcopal church to get warm. Two days earlier, her two-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with an invariably fatal lung disease. I cannot even begin to imagine how devastating that experience must be. She writes:

> **"Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing**

with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. . . .

“The day after we heard Mark’s diagnosis—and that he had a few months to live, maybe a few years— a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could this help? It couldn’t, they explained; but the procedure would let them see how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already exhausted by the previous day’s ordeal.

Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart—literally—and die. We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark's blanket, clothes, and Peter Rabbit, and carried him home.

"Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine" (pp. 3–4)

I am a pastor: I have lived my professional life in church. I am not even close to neutral about the topic.

For four decades I have witnessed the church doing a lot of things - finally, basically and most importantly, being a place where people find a community to help deal with what they cannot personally control: in Elaine Pagels' memorable phrase:

"Here is a family that knows how to face death."

After all - Jesus is reported to have said one day about the "ecclesia" - the called out community - the church - the rag-tag bunch of poor contrarians, humble fishermen, tax collectors and assorted hangers-on who followed them around - that he established the thing,

intended it, cared deeply about it and, by the way, he added - the gates of Hades - translates that "the power of death will not prevail against it."

In the meantime we are in a bit of a pickle .

Things are not what they used to be - to put it mildly. Change has happened so rapidly, and continues to happen, that analyzing, forecasting, prescribing about the crisis of mainline Protestantism - or the changing place of religion in American culture is a growth industry.

Not a week goes by that someone doesn't give me an article from *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal, Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker*, and say "Here - you gotta read this." And it's about

what's happening in and to this institution I still love . . . it's dying - it's thriving in some places - it's being outpaced by the competition and overwhelmed by a secular culture that simply doesn't seem to care and increasingly doesn't even know it's still around.

In my lifetime I have seen my Presbyterian Church decline in membership size from 3.3 million to 2.1 - and more - from the Inter Church Center, 475 Riverside Drive, New York City- the "God Box": a corporate headquarters we Presbyterians organized and helped finance, and invited one of our members, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to help dedicate - a wonderful place where distinguished executives worked with large staffs and

programs literally spanning the globe - to a converted warehouse in Louisville, Kentucky, with a national staff half the size it was a few years ago: spending a lot of time wondering what we ought to be doing next as numbers and revenues continue to decline.

Change is happening to all of us. I have a sense that, for better or worse, we Presbyterians reflect what is transpiring, more quickly than other denominations. It's no fun being the ecclesiastical equivalent of the canary which is sent into the depths of the polluted mine to see if it is possible to survive down there. But that is who we are and we've lost between one-third and one-half of our members and half our national staff and a good percentage of our annual revenue

stream which comes from congregations - who have plenty of issues of their own.

My hometown of Altoona, Pennsylvania, is a portrait of what has happened to us.

In the middle of the 19th century, the Pennsylvania Rail Road built engine construction plants, engine repair shops, a huge freight yard and placed hundreds of steam engines at a spot at the foot of first range of the Alleghenies - and essentially created a new community that became the city of Altoona. Laborers were imported from Italy, Germany, Ireland, Scotland - many Scots-Irish - to build the Rail Road and work in the shops. As the industry grew, so did the city. The high point was during and immediately after World

War II when the population reached 85,000.

There were Roman Catholic parishes - Protestant churches in every neighborhood and on prominent street corners downtown: 1st Lutheran, 1st Methodist, 1st Presbyterian. There were six Presbyterian churches - each of them thriving. Old First Church had 1,200 members: the Railroad executives, bankers, doctors. My church - Broad Avenue - 500 members, teachers, clerks, Railroad engineers. There was a church basketball league, even a Presbyterian Church league.

Today Altoona is down to about 50,000, there is no rail road, no industry to speak of. The two biggest businesses are the public schools and health care and when that happens a community is

on “life support.” And churches. I don’t know about First Lutheran and First Presbyterian, but there is virtually no downtown left besides the post office and a few bars. First Presbyterian got to 100 members or so and so did Broad Avenue - so they have merged and have a new lease on life. Second and Third Presbyterian are history. Replicate that all over the industrial Northeast and Midwest where most Presbyterians used to live.

The Presbyterian Church presents a similar, slightly more hopeful picture. But there are many city churches that 50 years ago, were vibrant, sustainable churches full of families and children. Today that church of 3 or 400 members in 1950 has 75, and they are mostly in their 70sm there are 6 children in the

Sunday School, the building is 100 years old and needs a new roof and furnace. They can barely manage to pay the Presbytery minimum salary and they're worried they won't have their own ministers.

We are not unique.

The churches are caught in the midst of a demographic and economic transformation of epic proportions and no one seems to be able to think of what to do other than keep doing what we always did and h old on for dear life.

In the meantime Willow Creek starts a church in the city - where people are - and h as it up and running in a school or theatre in a matter of months, in less time than it would take the Presbyterians to organize a Task

Force to conduct a feasibility study to determine whether or not to start a new church.

It is not all grim.

There are mainline churches that are thriving - with few exceptions they are churches that know how to be in mission.

There are evangelical churches that are thriving - and amazingly the evangelicals and mainliners are occasionally talking to one another and acknowledging that while we do not necessarily agree on this or that - we are in this together.

Let’s take a broader look.

One hundred years ago it was intellectually fashionable to predict the

imminent demise of religion. Karl Marx had labeled religion the opiate of the masses and was confident that economic liberation in a classless state would, for the first time, in history, render religion obsolete and irrelevant. The philosopher Frederick Nietzsche declared that God was dead and that the church was God's mausoleum.

Not many would make those predictions at the beginning of the 21st century. In fact, something akin to the opposite of those dire predictions happened and continues to happen.

- **Churches and religion not only did not disappear under Marx's political system, but became the inspiration and source of political rebellion that ultimately brought down the**

Communist governments of Eastern Europe

- **The church in China didn’t die, but went underground only to emerge fifty years later, stronger, numerically larger, confident and hopeful.**
- **Religion not only didn’t disappear but emerged in late 20th and early 21st century culture in the arts, cinema, novels and, of all places, in the academic community where a century ago, its demise was so confidently predicted.**
- **Scientists and theologians started talking to one another.**
- **Astronomers, astrophysicists and cosmologists discovered that yesterday’s certainty about the universe was superseded by the**

universe's expanding mystery and in the process started to sound like theologians.

- **Health care professionals wrote articles about the depth of the human spirit and the healing power of prayer.**
- **Courses on religion were presented to standing room only classes on American campuses. Theologian Harvey Cox's course on Christian Ethics was among the most popular at Harvard.**
- **Christianity exploded in East Africa and South American and "new" Christian churches in what were called "Third World Nations," grew rapidly and began to look outward and to send missionaries, occasionally to the very nations of**

Europe and North America form where earlier missionaries had brought the Gospel.

- **Religion began to claim the attention of the secular media and sales of books on religious topics skyrocketed.**

Clearly something is happening, frequently outside the boundaries of the traditional churches. One conclusion is that the churches became outdated and irrelevant. But another, more biblical possibility is that God is up to something new in the world, as the prophet promised. Who is to say that the ferment, the renewed and sustained hunger for religion and religious meaning, is not the result of God's lively spirit moving in the world?

Some are already calling it the post-denominational age. Walter Brueggemann says the church is now in something like "exile," a place different, indifferent and sometimes hostile. But it is in no way a hopeless place. Brueggemann reminds us that God calls people in exile to important work. Rabbi Irving Greenberg echoes the idea – "One of the most difficult trials facing Christianity is that having been a majority religion for most of its life, it is now entering into its own Diaspora; the exile of Christianity in the secular world. Sometimes it distorts the personality as one seeks self-protection. Sometimes the need for identity may lead to isolation or hostility or even hatred for the world." The Christian Churches, Rabbi Greenberg wisely suggests, could

learn something from the Jewish experience of being in exile. Douglas John Hall goes even further and proposes that the end of Christendom, the final disappearance of the church's dominant, privileged and powerful role in post-modern civilization means an opportunity for the church to address and meet critical human needs. Hall says the end of Christendom could mean a new and healthy and life –giving, world-saving future for Christianity.

Historian Martin Marty, in a succinct study of the changing status of Mainline churches, *Protestant Voices in American Pluralism*, traces the evolution, from 1607 Jamestown to 1955 (the publication of Will Herberg's classic *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*), from the dominant Colonial Big Three –

Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, to the unprecedented religious diversity of contemporary American culture. There is no longer a dominant religious voice. Mainline Protestant constitute 25 percent of the American population; Evangelicals, Fundamentalists and Pentecostals 75%; African-American Protestants, 8 %.

Marty hopes we can avoid the "politics of nostalgia and resentment" as churches live into this new role in post-modern culture; avoid efforts to "retake America" and reinforce our lost dominance. Instead, Professor Marty suggests that our hope lies in doing what we have done so faithfully in the past: building Community, living a tradition, tending to spiritual and

existential questions of meaning, and addressing whatever issues the world is struggling with, from our faith experience and tradition. Diversity, Marty says, is not going away. In fact, Mainline Protestantism, with its "culture of flexibility and tolerance" helped bring it into being.

One thing seems certain. Denominational efforts to stop the loss of members in order to insure institutional survival aren't very inspiring and don't work. Sitting in his Nazi prison cell as his church fought for its survival, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote haunting words:

Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self- preservation, as though that were an end in itself,

is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world . . . The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity.

The late Joseph Sittler, Lutheran Theologian, wrote words in 1979 that resonate deeply at the beginning of the 21st century:

The church in the next several decades is going to be a smaller, leaner, tougher company. I am convinced that the way for the church now is to accept the shrinkage, to penetrate the meaning and the threat of the prevailing secularity, and to tighten its

mind around the task given to the critical cadre.

But we have also seen that there is a strange resiliency within the church. Intentional persecution somehow is a source of spiritual renewal and courageous witness down through history. Even outright banishment only forces the church underground where it learns to thrive, and grow in new ways. Perhaps we should be careful about writing off the church as an obsolete anachronism whose time has come—and gone.

I believe that Jesus was perfectly serious when he left us that vivid, powerful image of the church standing against the gates of hell, the power of death itself. I think the stakes are that high.

Death's what we have to contend with, is it not? Death is the shadow that falls into every life. The gates of Hades, Tom Long says, "is a symbol for everything that opposes God's will: the powers of death and destruction that ravage human life." (*Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew,* p. 186).

The church's job—because Jesus gave it to us—is to be a reminder that we all need, which is that death does not have the last word about us: our institutions, our hopes and most precious dreams, our dearest ones, our deepest loves. Death does not have the last word. He does; Jesus Christ does. It is our job never to forget that, to hold on to the promise for dear life, to remind one another on those days when life causes us to forget it, or doubt it, or

disbelieve it, that the gates of hell will not prevail: Jesus Christ will.

“Here is a family that knows how to face death,” Elaine Pagels said, shivering in the narthex of the church, trying to cope with the worst thing that can happen to a parent.

The church I am privileged to serve underwent institutional trauma recently, and a profound experience of the power of the Gospel in the church in the face of death.

The Executive Associate Pastor, Dana Ferguson, died. She was just 42 years old, married, the mother of eleven-year-old twin boys. Dana was from Batesville, Mississippi, went to a private women’s college and Princeton Seminary. She was stylish, her attire

was anything but conventional clergy. Her specialty was brightly colored tights, and outrageously huge hats on Easter and Mother's Day. She had a big laugh and lighted up every room she entered. Her colleagues respected her, members of the congregation loved her — loved her sermons and particularly her prayers which were beautifully crafted with just the right words, evocative — almost daringly personal. People pulled out kleenex and daubed their eyes when Dana prayed.

She came to Fourth Presbyterian Church as Associate for Mission and unlikely as it seems, the small-town woman from the deep South had a profound and powerful and uncompromising commitment to social justice and equality for all of God's

children — across barriers of race, economic and social class, age, gender and sexual orientation. She was not particularly political: these convictions grew out of her deeply personal faith in Jesus Christ and her trust in him.

It is not possible to be at the center of a big, visible, urban church and hide something as profound as a serious illness.

Five years ago Dana began to be sick, lost a lot of weight, was jaundiced, couldn't eat. She continued to come to work and lead worship, and people saw what was happening. Diagnosis and surgeries at major Chicago Medical Centers, and at the Mayo Clinic didn't seem to help. Finally, after a hemorrhage and near catastrophe, an ER doctor in a small Michigan city put

his finger on the problem. She returned to Chicago, had the appropriate operation and slowly got better, returned to work.

Then a couple of years later, the condition returned — a rare liver condition, not classical malignancy, but just as dangerous. The very visible symptoms returned — weight loss, jaundice. We made the very difficult decision to put her on medical leave and she turned to the University of Chicago Medical Center, one of the finest in the world. For the next two months she underwent every conceivable test and procedure and surgery, and continued to decline. All the while, the congregation that loved her watched and waited. Then Dana died.

Her funeral was a powerful experience and witness. The sanctuary was full. She had planned the service and asked me to preach — "a full sermon" she said, "not one of those little bitty funeral meditations. Give them their money's worth." We sang the great hymns of the church. Our choir sang. The Brass Ensemble that plays monthly for worship played. At the end, Donna Gray and Calum MacLeod, two of her colleagues and I preceded her casket down the long center aisle, with her Ferguson Plaid stole lying on the top, led by a bagpiper, playing "Amazing Grace." Her husband Wayne, also a Presbyterian minister, her 11 year old sons Daniel and Taylor, her mother Betsy and sister Liz followed.

It was perhaps the saddest moment any of us had ever experienced. So much of life left. So much promise. So much love.

And then the most remarkable thing happened. The Brass Ensemble began the postlude "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" and after one stanza — modulated abruptly to Dixieland. Dana had led several mission trips to New Orleans to build Habitat Houses after Hurricane Katrina. She loved New Orleans. Tears gave way to smiles. Smiles burst through tears. The Dixieland Jazz kept on and on — and at the end, the most amazing thing I have ever seen in church — happened.

That congregation — 1,200 strong, stood and applauded.

And I couldn’t help think — this is why we are here. This is why there is a church.

Yes, Jesus meant to build a church. And yes, I believe, in the mystery of God’s will and God’s economy. God means for there to be a church everywhere. And, yes, I think one of the reasons you and I are on this earth is to help Jesus build his church and to pass it along to another generation of people who will follow us and be his church, his body.

“Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime,” the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said. “Therefore we must be saved by hope.” And so we are.

“I will build my church,” Jesus said, “And the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

Thanks be to God.